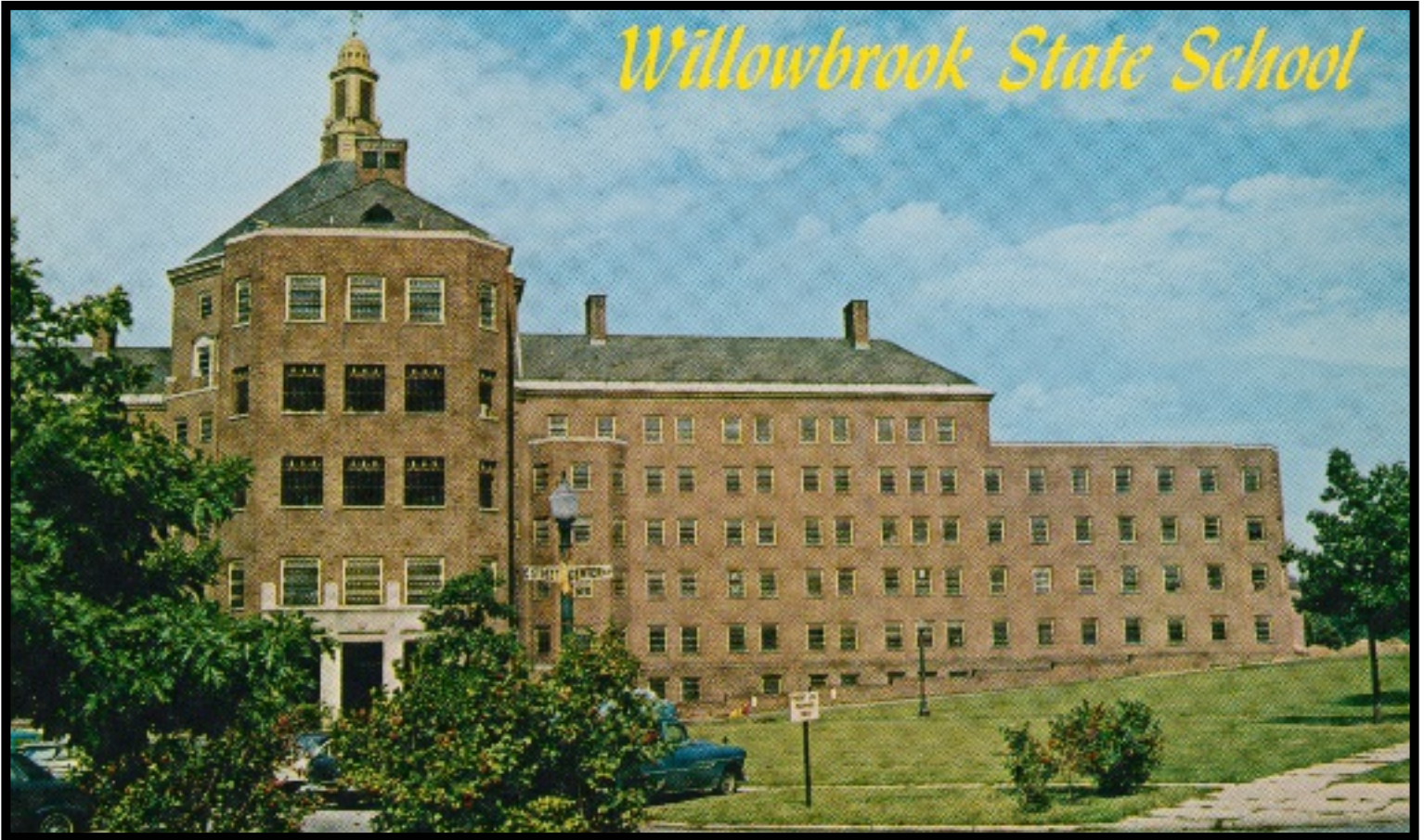


# Henry Geller

## A Memoir

These memories were shared at HeartShare Human Services  
and transcribed over the course of four months in late 2018.

*Willowbrook State School*



# COMING TO WILLOWBOOK

My name is Henry Jonathan Geller. I was born on October 1, 1946. I am 72 years old. I don't know where I was born.

My parents were Arlene and Andrew Geller. I never knew my parents. I have been told I had a brother, but I never met him. He did not live at Willowbrook.

I vaguely remember my grandparents. I am not sure if they were my mother's or my father's parents. I saw them only once, when they came to visit me at Willowbrook. I was a little boy. I pleaded with them to come visit me. They just showed up. I met with them in a public space, and a lot of other children and their visitors were there.

They never came back to visit me.

My parents never visited me, but I don't miss what I never had.

I was placed at Willowbrook because I have cerebral palsy (CP). I don't have an intellectual disability. I lived in Buildings 2, 5, and 19 at Willowbrook.

I was four years old when I went to live at Willowbrook. I have no memories of my life before Willowbrook. I have no memories of the day I was taken to Willowbrook or by whom.

I think my parents gave me up because they didn't know what to do with me because of my CP. They probably didn't know what to do with me because I couldn't walk. Back then, I don't think there were schools or clinics for someone like me.

My first memory of Willowbrook was getting up to try to walk. I refused to listen to the people who told me to stay off my feet. I had to learn to walk when I first went there. I really wanted to learn to walk. I wore a brace on my right leg, and I still wear it today. I also wear special shoes, since one leg is shorter than the other. In June of 2018, I got my first personal wheelchair, but I only use it for long distances.

I believe it took me around two or three years before I could learn to walk. The attendant would come put me in a wheelchair to take me down to therapy, where they stretched my legs and made me walk using parallel bars, steps, and a ladder on the floor. I loved going to therapy. It gave me something to do. I only attended school two hours and 15 minutes a day, if that. School was in Building 3, but that building was used for everything (e.g. as a church, a synagogue, etc.). We had tables and chairs. The number of students in any given class varied. I was taught how to read and do math at Willowbrook. However, my penmanship was terrible, probably because of my CP.

Building 2 was the hospital. I lived upstairs on the fourth floor and had my physical therapy downstairs. If I went to school, they took me in a wheelchair, or I walked to Building 3.

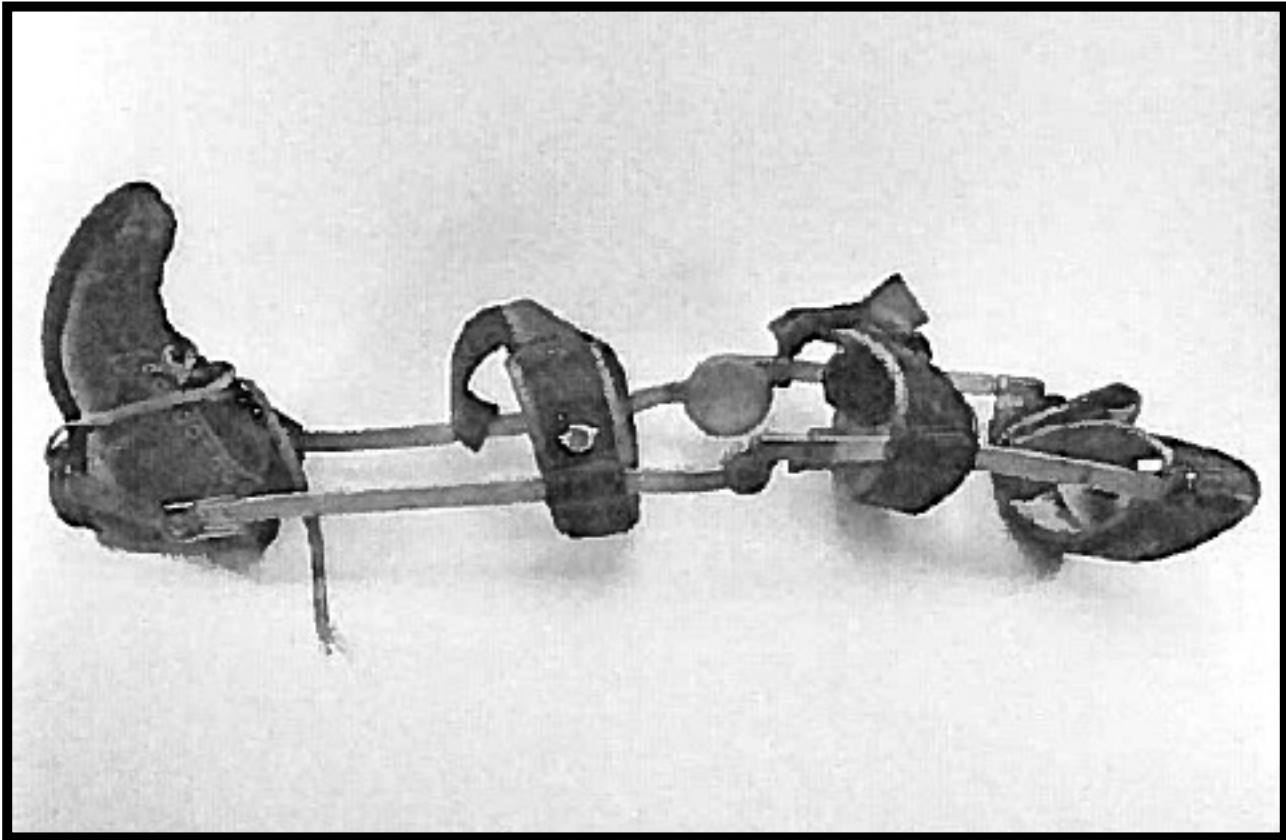
There was a day room on the first floor in Building 2. The fourth floor was a big room for boys, whose ages ranged from very young to teens. There was no privacy. It was a room full of bed

after bed after bed. Everyone had his own bed. My bed had a fitted sheet and a sheet to put over me, and in the winter I had a blanket. I had one pillow with a pillowcase. There were a fair number of windows. They had screens on them. There was heat in the winter, but, in the summer, there were only a few fans that hung on the walls. I think I just wore underwear to bed.

I had my own clothes. At night, I would leave my dirty clothes at the foot of my bed. In the morning, we would get clean clothes out of the linen closet. We had regular clothes, including underwear and socks. Most of the time my clothes fit, and they were clean. I may have needed assistance dressing when I was much younger, but today I can dress myself independently.

I don't remember how I got the clothes, because I never went shopping for them. I never visited the laundry on the grounds. Sometimes the other residents might steal my personal items (e.g. toothpaste). We had to buy our own toothpaste from a store on the grounds. I don't know where the money came from, but it was placed on a PX card.

There was one big bathroom for all the boys. I think it had urinals and toilets, but no stalls. There were showers, but they were in an open area (no stalls). The sinks were lined up against the wall. There was no privacy. It was clean, but only until people used it. Soap was provided, also toilet paper, towels, and washcloths. I don't remember having any shampoo, and I don't remember any paper towels or hand dryers.



## GROWING UP AT WILLOWBOOK

I don't know my ethnicity, but I am Jewish. On Saturdays, I attended Sabbath services in Building 3 in the morning. There was a rabbi assigned to Willowbrook. I don't remember his name. When I turned 13, I was bar mitzvahed at Willowbrook. A lot of visitors came. I don't remember how many boys were bar mitzvahed with me, but it was not a lot. I think the last time I saw my grandparents was at my bar mitzvah. I don't remember reading anything as part of the services, and I don't think there was a reception afterwards. I have not attended synagogue since then, but I think I might like to go again.

My grandparents lived at 300 East 57th Street in Manhattan. I never visited them or saw the building where they lived. I had a phone number for them: PL9 3551, and I called them occasionally. They owned a shoe store, but I don't know where. I didn't ask them for much, but once I asked them for a pair of shoes. I don't remember whether they brought them or not. The last time I saw my grandparents was in 1959, which was when I turned 13. I have no photographs of any of my family. They missed out on some of the things I did, and I missed out doing things with them.

I remember I was provided with shoes when I was at Willowbrook. I also was given an iron brace with straps, and I had to “unlock” the brace whenever I wanted to sit down. I don’t remember when I first got the brace, but it was not when I first arrived. My shoes were kept under my bed when I went to sleep. No one stole my shoes because it would not have done them any good. This was because they were orthopedic shoes.

When you went into the dining room at Willowbrook, it was like eating at Yankee or Shea Stadium with a roof. It was one large room in a different building, but I don’t remember which one. I went to the dining room by myself. I walked up a big hill. That way, I didn’t have to go up the steps, which I would not have been able to do.

After one large group ate, another group would come in after it. It was extremely noisy! I was able to feed myself and required no special eating equipment. Not many of the others had special eating equipment, but several needed assistance to eat. Some needed the staff to hold the spoon for them, and others needed to be fed. We had knives, forks, and spoons, and metal (not plastic) trays. The trays were divided into sections so that when we went down the lunch line, the cafeteria workers could put the food we asked for onto our trays. The glasses, which also were metal, were kept in a separate area, along with the utensils. We generally were served milk. There were no napkins, so we tried not to spill. There were straws for those who needed them. I don’t know if lunch was timed, but I didn’t want to stay there for very long. This was because I knew others were waiting to eat and because I wanted to run around outside. There were great big long tables and wooden chairs where we ate.



I was in a band at Willowbrook. It wasn't always the same people who participated. I was one of the singers. We sang all different kinds of songs. My favorite was "I Whistle a Happy Tune." They had trumpets, trombones, clarinets, pianos, and drums. We met in the auditorium in Building 3. I don't remember how often we met to practice. We gave performances at Willowbrook in the auditorium in Building 3, and we occasionally went off site to perform. We performed at the Waldorf Astoria and Tavern on the Green, and the band was on television once. It was some type of variety show. The cameras were hidden, so I didn't see them. Unfortunately, I never saw the performance when it aired on TV. I think I participated in the band from age 13 to 17.

Dolores Pinizio was a special friend I had at Willowbrook. I don't know if she left Willowbrook before or after I did. I never saw her again. I also had other friends when I lived at Willowbrook, but I no longer remember their names. I wouldn't say I was popular there, but I wasn't disliked.

I worked in the Administration Building (Building 1) at Willowbrook. I think I started when I was 16, but I'm not sure. I did different clerical tasks like filing and collating – typical office stuff. The staff in the offices there taught me what to do. There were manual typewriters, stencil cutters, and mimeograph machines, but no computers or copiers like there are today. I worked Monday through Friday for four hours each day. I never got paid, but I enjoyed it, because it was a way to stay busy.

## NEWFOUND FREEDOM

On September 29, 1967, I left Willowbrook for a weekend visit to a place they were going to send me. I was not told I would be leaving beforehand, so I had made no preparations. I think one of the staff came to tell me. The staff helped me gather my clothes, and I put them in a suitcase.

I was taken to 2189 Washington Avenue in the Fordham section of the Bronx. The woman who owned the two family house, Mrs. Costello, who I believe was close to 70 years old, also had another man living there, whose wife lived in the Hamptons. He was an alcoholic. There was at least one other person living there, as well, but no one else from Willowbrook.

It was different for me. This was a weekend visit for me to see if I would like to live there. I said yes, and I moved in on October 12, 1967. Mrs. Costello got paid for the people she had living in her home. She had no children that I know of, so we probably provided her with company. A family called the Tobins lived downstairs, and I lived upstairs with Mrs. Costello.

I didn't go many places when I lived there. However, Mrs. Costello took me to the supermarket and taught me how to shop. I had never been in a grocery store before. We went to Arthur Avenue, which I liked. I never did my own laundry at Willowbrook, so she also taught me how to do my laundry. She had a washing machine and dryer in the house. I already knew how to use money. I had learned that at Willowbrook. I learned how to change my bed, fold my clothes, etc.



Although I saw people clean at Willowbrook, I was not asked to do it there, nor was I asked to do it by Mrs. Costello. I liked hanging out in the kitchen with Mrs. Costello. She was a good cook, and I picked up some pointers about cooking from her.

One time during the years I lived in the Bronx, I told someone, “Do I knock you because you’re black? Don’t knock me for being handicapped!” People made assumptions about me because I had difficulty walking.

I was on welfare for almost seven years. I wanted a job, not an executive job, but just something to do! For my first job, I worked at a newsstand in the lobby of 780 Concourse Village, which was an apartment building in the Bronx. I don’t remember how I got this job, but it was tolerable. There weren’t a lot of people coming to buy things from the newsstand. They straggled in.

I believe I left Mrs. Costello’s in 1971. She was moving upstate to a house she owned up there, so arrangements were made for me to move to 112-32 38th Avenue, between Flushing and Corona, in Queens. I don’t know who made these arrangements. If I had gone upstate with Mrs. Costello, I would have stayed on welfare, which I did not want to do.

I lived in a two family house in Queens, and I walked to Shea Stadium (now called Citi Field) a lot. I saw many baseball games. Naomi Rosario owned the house, and she had three people (including me) living there. The other two individuals were not from Willowbrook. They were not disabled. I lived there for more than ten years.

I started working for the City of New York at this time. It was supposed to be for two years, but

when the time was up, I didn't want to leave. I did messenger and clerical work in lower Manhattan, around City Hall.

I next moved to 685½ Fourth Avenue in Brooklyn. I don't remember the name of the neighborhood or what year I moved there. I lived in one other house in Brooklyn, at 160 23rd Street, between Third and Fourth Avenues. I now live in a residence for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Queens. I moved there around 2010. It is sponsored by HeartShare Human Services of New York and called the Subbiondo I Residence.



## THE GOOD LIFE

I had been working as a temp for New York City for almost three years at 305 Broadway in Manhattan, the City Hall area, and they kept saying, "You're going to get the job," but I wasn't sure. On November 1, 1973, I became a permanent full time employee, with benefits. However, it took a while before they put me in the pension system. When they did, they had to make up for the years they did not put money into it for me. I was supposed to work 40 hours a week, but I always gave more. Because of how the half fare card worked back then, you could not use it during rush hour, between 7:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. Therefore, I usually made it a point to get to work early and leave late.

I did messenger and clerical work for the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission. I walked all over. I called it "The Communication Walk," because I went a lot of the time to different radio stations (e.g. 1010 WINS at 90 Park Avenue) and newspaper offices (when we HAD newspapers). I also frequently went to 830 Fifth Avenue and the Arsenal (where I picked up the payroll). The Parks Department later moved to 59th Street and Columbus Circle, and I delivered there, too.

I never carried a subway map. I also used buses, but I never carried a bus map, either. The bus I remember using on a regular basis was the M6 that went from 5th Avenue and 64th Street to South Ferry.

I remember the NYC Municipal Building at 1 Centre Street – what a dump!

Although some people viewed me as vulnerable, I never got mugged. One office actually sent their secretary to pick up the payroll because they thought I wasn't capable enough to do it. However, she was the one who got mugged, and the whole payroll had to be redone.

There was not a lot of downtime. I liked to keep busy. The days flew by. The “iron horse” (subway train) was the main thing that slowed me down. People held the doors, the trains didn't come, etc.

I never met any mayors or city council members. I never wanted to meet liars!

I liked the people I worked with. My favorite building to work in was one that was very difficult to find: 100 Old Slip, where South Street Seaport is today. However, back then, there were no stores or restaurants.

For lunch, I would grab a “dirty water dog” (hot dog from a street vendor). I generally did not bring my lunch because I never knew where I would be at lunch time. The hot dog vendors were everywhere.

I always got good performance reviews. What my employers never looked forward to was my one month off. I actually earned six weeks of vacation a year. I chose August for my vacation because it was the hottest month. That is when I would go on my Sprout vacations. I would take the other two weeks as “stay-cations.” I rarely got sick, so I ended up with a lot of unused sick time when I retired. No one else wanted to pick up the payroll. Now, all of this is done electronically.



However, messenger work will never go out of style, because some things cannot be mailed or e-mailed or signed for otherwise.

There was only one messenger where I worked: me. I don't know how they managed when I wasn't there. My best work skill was my punctuality.

I worked from 1973 to 1999, 26 years. I now receive a NYC pension and Social Security. I also have Medicare and Medicaid. I don't know how much I receive, and I don't care to know. I trust HeartShare will use the money for my care.

I remember 15 cent tokens for the subway. I also remember the windows on the subway cars being so dirty you couldn't see out of them. I got lost once on the subway, and I vowed never to get lost again. I never did. I learned by observation how to get around. The only one who is going to mess you up is you!

I now use Access-a-Ride. I began using it when I retired. I have never had trouble with Access-a-Ride, perhaps because I hardly ever use it.

Nancy Goeschel is a friend I made when we worked together at the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission. She left before I did. We stay in touch via telephone, but I haven't heard from her in a long time. She lived in New York, but it has been a while since I saw her.

I used to wake up between 4:00 a.m. and 4:30 a.m. when I worked. That's when most people would be stumbling in from the bars! I left for work around 6:00 a.m. I usually got home between 5:00 p.m. and 5:30 p.m. I went to bed between 8:00 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. I often watched TV – the

news, Jeopardy, and Wheel of Fortune. There was a house I lived in where I cooked my meals, but, in other places where I lived, there was staff who cooked for me. As for my cooking skills, let me put it this way: Those who ate the food I prepared didn't complain; there was nothing left over; and they asked me to bring it again. I make a very good lasagna. I also like roasting a chicken in the oven.

When I worked, I would go to the doctor for my health care. I would go into work first, and then leave a little early to go to my doctor's appointment.

I couldn't wait to retire. I wanted to break the routine. I now can get up when I want to, and go to bed when I want to.

I currently get up at 8:00 a.m. I usually go to bed around 10:00 p.m. I watch TV at night. I still watch Jeopardy and Entertainment Tonight. I like to watch sports on TV, especially football. I have no favorite team. However, I like the Mets a lot.

I have enjoyed several vacations with Sprout. I've been to England, Italy, and Paris. I would like to go to Spain to watch the bullfighting sometime. One of my favorite trips was when I went to Cleveland to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. I like The Moonglows, The Spinners, and Gladys Knight and the Pips. I love Motown, and I saw Stevie Wonder in concert at Radio City Music Hall.

I have never had a relationship with someone. I don't know why.

I would never use a social media dating site because you don't know what you're getting.

I am a registered voter. I have voted since around 1970. I never miss a vote. I now use the Ballot Marking Device to vote. I like it. I am a registered Democrat.



## FINAL WORDS

I have enjoyed sharing my memories to create this book. I hope the reader has learned a lot from hearing about my experiences. I have lived an interesting life. I don't know if anyone else would want to copy it, and I would not want to re-live parts of it, especially my time at Willowbrook and learning to walk. Those were tough times. I feel especially proud of working for so many years and not being on welfare. I have paid my own way.

Overall, I am happy and feel very positive about my many accomplishments.



